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# Review of "America's Great War: World War I And The American Experience" By Robert Zieger

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## Review of "America's Great War: World War I And The American Experience" By Robert Zieger

### **Comments**

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*America's Great War: World War I and the American Experience.* By Robert H. Zeiger. (Boston: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000. Pp. xxii, 272. Illustrations, bibliographic note, index. \$27.95.)

In *America's Great War*, Robert H. Zeiger provides a sweeping overview of America's participation in World War I for students and general readers. This is a well-crafted and readable book that makes good use of recent scholarship to address the questions of America's entry into the war, the soldiers' combat experience, race and labor relations at home, and the failures of the Paris Peace Conference. Woodrow Wilson takes center stage in this account, leading the country into war with stirring rhetoric of creating a better world (which Zeiger brilliantly analyzes) only to fall far short of his goals when he stubbornly refuses to accept a list of Senate reservations to the Versailles Treaty, thereby dooming its chances for ratification. Zeiger concludes that Wilson rightly decided for war once Germany resumed the submarine attacks that threatened American lives and even absolves the Versailles Treaty for imposing a victor's peace on Germany. Reparations, Zeiger argues, were entirely justified given Germany's wanton destruction of property in France and Belgium. The key failing of the peace treaty, according to Zeiger, was its preservation of colonial empires.

Between the declaration of war and negotiation of the peace treaty, Americans saw their society turned upside down as the country mobilized its material and manpower. Zeiger repeatedly argues that the war's short duration prevented the dramatic changes in relations between the government and the American people from having more than a temporary effect on labor relations, race relations, or women's status. Hence, labor unions had little time to secure continued government support for their right to organize or for fair wages and hours. Likewise, women's expanded opportunities in the workplace did not result in a changed conception of appropriate female occupations. The year and a half that the nation spent at war was also too short, Zeiger argues, for the support and participation of African Americans to become critical, as during the American Revolution and the Civil War. Unlike after these earlier conflicts, African Americans experienced little improvement in their opportunities and civic status. On the other hand, the reasonably quick return to normalcy helped curtail the wartime and postwar assault on civil liberties. For those Progressives who had hoped that the creation of a wartime state would further the cause of social justice, there was therefore reason to both lament and celebrate the government's decision to dismantle its wartime regulatory apparatus immediately.

Zeiger does not neglect the soldier in this account, providing gripping and moving testimony of the horrors that combatants experienced on the Western Front. He also nicely notes the military contribution that the Americans made to the ultimate Allied victory. The Americans, the author notes, helped stop the German drive to Paris in the spring of 1918 and provided crucial manpower and a morale boost to Allied troops during the summer counteroffensives. By pinning down large numbers of German troops during the fall Meuse-Argonne campaign, the American army enabled the Allies to make significant gains elsewhere along the Western Front. Through these acts, the Americans helped shorten the war by a year. "Everything considered," Zeiger writes, "this was a splendid achievement" (p. 114).

Throughout *America's Great War*, Zeiger clearly states his own conclusions about the war experience, but he invites the reader to consider alternative positions through long paragraphs (occasionally too long) of rhetorical questions. Overall, he more than meets his goal of providing a comprehensive and thought-provoking account of America's Great War experience for students and general readers.

Jennifer D. Keene

*Keene is an associate professor of history at the University of Redlands. She is the author of Doughboys, the Great War and the Remaking of America (2001) and The United States and the First World War (2000).*